

From Route to Road and Body to Car: Changing Aesthetics of Religious Tourism in a Sacred Landscape

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Introduction

Braj-yatra is a pilgrimage journey in north India that is mainly undertaken by devotees of Krishna. It is a circumambulation of a region comprising of several sites where Krishna is believed to have performed divine plays. More importantly, *Braj-yatra* is the means by which pilgrims can “recreate in their imagination the life of the god to whom they are devoted or whose stories appeal to them ... to hear the stories retold at the sites where miraculous events took place ... [and] ... see material evidence and representations of the gods and great devotees.”¹ Devotees believe that the journey through the landscape of forests and lakes provides opportunities for a spiritual encounter with Krishna. Upon first reading about the *Braj-yatra*, I was interested in experiencing this journey and the sacred landscape both as a pilgrim and a researcher. In this paper, I reflect on some of the experiences of this pilgrimage to explain how ‘aesthetics’ of religious travel in sacred landscapes are not based on physical appearances and form, but are largely derived from emotional attachment underlined with mythological stories, religious rituals, and spiritual connections associated with the landscape. I will also argue that the differentiation of these aesthetics depend on the mode and method of religious travel in sacred landscapes.

This paper is organised in four sections. In the first, I review literature around the concept of landscape aesthetics, pilgrimage landscapes, and religious travel, to develop a framework that helps to better understand aesthetics associated with religious travel and sacred landscape. The second section describes the tradition of *Braj-yatra* and highlights its unique features. A personal narrative of my pilgrimage travel is presented in the third section. Comparing my experiences against the traditional form of the journey, I then discuss the key factors that help in understanding aesthetics in contemporary pilgrimages. In particular, I emphasise how the mode and method of travel

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¹ Alan Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987), p. 103.

generates a new discourse on aesthetics of religious travel in a sacred landscape.

Landscape Aesthetics, Sacred Landscape, and Travel

In a seminal work on landscape aesthetics, Paul Gobster, Joan Nassauer, Terry Daniel, and Gary Fry argue that landscape aesthetic experiences derive mainly from “direct perceptual experiences of certain environmental phenomena ... [and] ... are fundamentally triggered by affective (emotion-based) processes.”² Their explanations of landscape aesthetics are based on observations from ecological landscapes that are definitive and tangible, and are based on the premise that “aesthetic experience is a feeling of pleasure attributable to directly perceivable characteristics of spatially or temporally arrayed landscape patterns.”³ It is only in passing and in a relatively lesser way that they allude to the experience of such landscapes as mediated through different “personal-social situational activities or concerns.”⁴ Consequently, their exposition appears to limit the idea of aesthetics to perceived care, attachment, and identity, and their thrust seems to be on using the concept of aesthetics towards ecological conservation of landscapes. There is, however, a need to extend and expand upon the perceptual experiences in understanding aesthetics of a pilgrimage landscape, as they may not necessarily be environmental phenomena but, rather, socially constructed places.

Pilgrimage landscapes, in theory and in practice, are cultural landscapes. This idea is central in understanding pilgrimage sites because it helps to think about these places in terms of the territories that are created, appropriated, organised, and represented by human agency.⁵ Here, landscape is something that is modified through cultural processes. According to Carl Sauer, a cultural landscape is “fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, [and] the cultural landscape is the result.”⁶ In simpler terms, cultural landscape is a place-specific ensemble of symbols, rituals, behaviour, and everyday social practices that help in developing a shared set of meanings. Thus, landscape is dialectically related to

² Paul H. Gobster, Joan I. Nassauer, Terry C. Daniel, and Gary Fry, ‘The Shared Landscape: What Does Aesthetics Have to do with Ecology?’, *Landscape Ecology*, vol. 22, no. 7 (2007), p. 964.

³ Gobster, Nassauer, Daniel, and Fry, ‘The Shared Landscape,’ p. 964.

⁴ Gobster, Nassauer, Daniel, and Fry, ‘The Shared Landscape,’ p. 959.

⁵ Juan Campo, ‘American Pilgrimage Landscapes,’ *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 558, no. 9 (1998), pp. 40-54.

⁶ Carl Sauer, ‘The Morphology of Landscape,’ in *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 343.

culture. Amita Sinha has effectively used this approach in her analysis of sacred landscapes in India. She claims that:

Landscapes ... can be read, that is, observed and interpreted as representations – signs and symbols – that encode meanings. They represent cultural narratives, communicating central tenets of culture and ways of life.⁷

Thus, symbolic and representational values are important in the understanding of landscape. The meanings are more readily interpreted in the longer and circuitous journeys in landscape as they provide opportunities for deeper aesthetic engagement with the landscape. According to Kinsley:

Pilgrimage is the process whereby pilgrims open themselves to the sacred power, the numinous quality, of the landscape, whereby they establish a rapport with the land that is spiritually empowering. An underlying assumption of pilgrimage seems to be that the land cannot be intensely known and experienced from a distance; it can be fully known, its story deeply appreciated, only by travelling the land itself ... The experience can be lasting, transforming one's perspective permanently.⁸

Alongside journeys and routes, spatial stories that are intimately connected with physical places are equally important. They need to be talked about, recounted, or written and depicted for a better appreciation of the landscape.⁹

Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar suggest that “in pilgrimage, learning through ritual, texts, and story-telling synergistically combine so that the experiential sense is heightened.”¹⁰ This experiential sense is captured by Diana Eck:

The believer ‘sees’ the sacred sights (temples, churches, relics, icons, monuments); he/she ‘hears’ the sacred sounds (church and temple bells, drum beats, chanting, singing, the call to prayer), ‘touches’ the sacred artifacts (icons, deities, texts); ‘eats’ special food (such as consecrated food); and ‘smells’ specific aromas (incense, fresh flowers).¹¹

⁷ Amita Sinha, *Landscapes in India: Forms and Meanings* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2006), p. 4.

⁸ David Kinsley, ‘Learning the Story of the Land: Reflections on the Liberating Power of Geography and Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition,’ in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 235.

⁹ See Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

¹⁰ Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, ‘Religion and Place Attachment: A Study of Sacred Places,’ *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2004), p. 393.

¹¹ Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersberg: Anima Books, 1981), p. 9.

It can thus be said that the experience of aesthetics in a pilgrimage landscape is similar to what Arnold Berleant has termed the “aesthetics of engagement.”¹² In this model of appreciation of the environment, there is no distance between the observer and the observed, appreciator and appreciated, as all senses are involved in the experience and there is a multi-sensory continuity between the subject and the object.

The significance of the aesthetics of engagement can be seen through an example of a ritual with which pilgrims engage in pilgrimage landscapes, particularly with water. The performer invests a physical river with symbolic meaning, but a priest assisting the performer interprets this meaning for the performer. By completing the ritual, a dialectic relationship is forged; not only does the performer fulfil a religious need, but the river is also re-sanctified and its value as a sacred object in the landscape is reinforced. But this connection may change in another scenario; if, for any reason, the heavy pollution in the river deterred the performer, the pilgrimage performance would remain incomplete. Not accessing the river physically would have affected the image of the river in the performer’s mind. There is thus a break between the meaning, the performance, the performer, and, therefore, the physical incorporation of objects in the imagined sacred landscape.

Indeed, the conceptual premise of the aesthetics of engagement provides a way to understand the aesthetics of religious travel in a landscape. Alongside time, space, journey, and motivation, mediation of these aspects by external agencies and context all become significant factors for the exploration of the travellers’ engagement with the landscape. The accounts of the pilgrimage journeys around the region of Braj in north India that follow expound upon these factors that determine the differentiation of such aesthetics.

The Sacred Landscape of Braj and *Braj-yatra*

Braj represents the mythical and symbolic setting for the legend of Krishna.¹³ Although it existed as a concept since ancient times, its geographical fixity is dated to the fifteenth century, when the leading Vaishnava gurus of the Bhakti (devotional worship) movement such as Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya and

¹² Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 218; Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), p. 200.

¹³ Descriptions of the places of pilgrimage in Braj are found in five major Vaishnava *Puranas*. These five are the *Varaha Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, *Narada Purana*, *Adi Purana*, and *Padma Purana*. For more on these, see Entwistle, *Braj*, pp. 232-45. Although these scriptures cover a wide range of time periods, none of the sections pertaining to Braj appear to have been written before the sixteenth century.

their disciples discovered and connected various geographical features of the region such as rivers, hills, lakes, and forests with stories from Krishna's legend (*lilas*).¹⁴ *Braj Bhakti Vilasam*, a literary work composed in 1553 by Narayan Bhatt, a disciple of Chaitanya, defined this pilgrimage landscape in formal and concrete terms. His treatise identified 133 forests and woodlands (*bans*), and hundreds of lakes and ponds, and assigned every natural feature to its own tutelary deity. It described the landscape of Braj in the form of a touring guide for pilgrims, with the itinerary, the procedure of travel, and the rituals that needed to be performed at every significant site.¹⁵ The circumambulation of the entire region came to be popularly known as *Braj-yatra* or, simply, the *Caurasi kos parikrama*, the 84 kos. circuit (one kos. being roughly 3.5 kilometres) of the Braj region.

The most popular conception of the Braj landscape is the area where Krishna was born and grew to adulthood.¹⁶ It was seen as the playground in

¹⁴ Entwistle, *Braj*, pp. 100-125.

¹⁵ There were two forms of pilgrimage in the region, *Braj Yatra* and *Ban Yatra*. The former involved a tour of villages and settlements in the Braj region (distance of about 336 kos. and performed in Vaishakh), while the latter focused on travels to the forests, thickets, ponds, and lakes where Krishna is said to have performed miraculous deeds or significant events (this yatra covered 84 kos. in its perimeter, and was completed in 23 days and performed in Bhadrapad). Most contemporary pilgrims, however, do not distinguish between the two patterns of travel in practice. See Entwistle, *Braj*, pp. 100-125.

¹⁶ The descriptions of the landscape of Braj that appeared in religious scriptures and texts also use other representations of Braj: as a twelve petalled flower with each flower signifying a major forest, and as a form of Krishna's body consisting of organs and limbs. Narayan Bhatt identifies these parts with the twelve major forests and other important sites in Braj: Mathura is Krishna's heart; Madhuban is his navel; Kumudban and Talban are his two breasts; Vriindaban is his brow; Bahulaban and Mahaban are his two arms; Bhandiraban and Kokilaban are his two legs; Khadirban and Badhrikaban are his two shoulders; Chatraban and Lohaban are his two eyes; Belban and Bhadraban are his two ears; Kamaban is his chin; Triveni and Sakhikupaban are his two lips; Svarna and Vihala are his two rows of teeth; Surabhiban is his tongue; Mayurban is his forehead; Manengitaban is his nose; Sheshashayi and Parmanadabann are his two nostrils; Karhela and Kami are his buttocks; Karnaban is his penis; Krishnakshipana is his anus; Nandanaban is his head; Indraban is his back; Shikhshaban, Chandraban, Lohban, Nandgram, and Srikund are the five fingers of his right hand; Gadhsthan, Lalitagram, Bhanupur, Gokul, and Baldev are the five fingers of his left hand; Govardhan, Javavt, Sanketban, Naradban, and Madhuban are the five toes of his left foot; and Mridban, Janhaka, Menakaban, Kajjaliban, and Nandakup are the five toes of his right foot. Quoted in David Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 126.

which Krishna existed in “human context, free of godly manifestations,”¹⁷ a form that Vaishnava devotees could relate to and embrace with unconditional love and faith. At the heart of Braj pilgrimage is the theme of the forest where Krishna played. David Haberman reiterates that “regardless of what has actually survived in this age of deforestation, Braj is conceived of as a forest.”¹⁸ Therefore, a journey through the forests, lakes, ponds, and mountains will lead to an experience of Krishna’s presence in the landscape of Braj. How this journey actually takes place is equally important in realising the experience and appreciation of the landscape.

A Typical and Traditional *Braj-yatra*

The *Braj-yatra* is an annual feature that usually begins during the monsoon season after the festival that celebrates the birth of Krishna (generally in the month of August). The itinerary and routes taken to complete this journey differ among Vaishnava sects. Some sects retrace the path taken by their founders in the sixteenth century, and complete the circumambulation in fifteen days. The most elaborate *Braj-yatra* organised by the Pushtimarg sect takes place over six to seven weeks and is known as the *bari-yatra* or ‘big pilgrimage.’¹⁹ The different *Braj-yatras* are organised and directed by the religious heads and funded by collective sponsorships and voluntary contributions of participating patrons and devotees. A succinct description of a typical *Braj-yatra* is offered by Saraswati Prasad Mittal:

The *Braj-yatra* is annually organised from Mathura by some Vaishnava gurus and their followers. Pilgrims arrive well ahead of time and stay in *dharmshalas* or at their *pandas*’ houses. The leading *goswamis* of the *yatra* also camp in Mathura well in advance of commencement of *yatra* ... Sometimes, pilgrims also go and stay in Vrindavan or Gokul ... The most important *yatra* is the one organised by *goswamis* from Shri Vallabha sect which is joined by thousands of pilgrims every year. In this *yatra*, all measures are taken for security and comfort of pilgrims. The district administration also provides some help by making arrangements for police, hospital, post, and a bazaar. The organiser contracts out the arrangements for night halts and it is the contractor’s responsibility to secure and lay tents at halting places, transport them from one site

¹⁷ Steven J. Gelberg and Srivatsa Goswami, ‘Interview With Srivatsa Goswami,’ in *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West*, ed. Steven J. Gelberg (New York: Grove Press, 1983), pp. 196-258.

¹⁸ David Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 48.

¹⁹ Entwistle, *Braj*, pp. 100-125.

to another and also provide transport for the less fit pilgrims. All arrangements are made and supervised by a committee of *Pandas* under the guidance of the leading *goswami* (the *yatra-samiti*).²⁰

The organisers of each *Braj-yatra* provide their followers with booklets containing detailed information about the religious importance of the *yatra*, the itinerary, descriptions of the places to be visited, the rituals to be performed at these sites, rules of participation, and a brief history of the sect and its leading religious figures.²¹ Haberman emphasises that the “*yatra* does not begin until certain preliminary rituals have been performed after the sacred zone has been entered.”²²

Cultural performances such as feasts, *kathas*, and *raslilas* are integral to *Braj-yatra*. *Raslila* is a form of folk theatre involving performances of songs, dance, and dramatic vignettes from Krishna’s life in the Braj region, and is generally performed at the physical location associated with the legend presented.²³ *Katha* is an oral exegesis of the legend of Krishna and mainly uses the *Bhagavatpurana* as its base text for narration. In a typical *yatra*, at the end of each day of the *yatra*, the participants listen to *kathas* or watch *raslilas* that are performed by professionals contracted by the organisers. Mittal describes the formation of camps during the *Braj-yatras*:

When the *yatra* halts for the day, a temporary ‘city of tents’ arises ... In the centre is the tent of the ‘Maharajji’ [the religious leader]. On either side of this tent are the tents of special participants (major sponsors of the *yatra*), the manager of the *yatra*, and *yatra*-related services including postal facilities, clinics, etc. The *ras-mandap* [the

²⁰ Saraswati Prasad Mittal, *Caurasi Kos ki Braj-yatra* (Agra: Universal Press, 1981), p. 14. My translation from Hindi.

²¹ A booklet produced for a *Braj-yatra* in 1978 by the *Sri Radha Madhav Sankirtan Mandal*, a group from the agricultural market town of Hapur in Uttar Pradesh, lists 16 rules of organisation, 8 major rituals to be performed, 18 values that participants should abide by, and 32 crimes from which they should abstain during the *yatra*. In addition, it reminds participants of 15 reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage, declaring that “the *yatra* is certainly not for comfort, recreation, entertainment, eating and sleeping, but is for meditation, spiritual enhancement, virtue-based living and resolving life by seeking shelter in the god.” This *yatra* was organised by Lala Chajjimal, a merchant from Hapur; it began and ended in Vrindavan and had night camps at 30 different places along the Braj pilgrimage circuit. See the detailed account in Lala Chajjimal and Hariram Panchsheel, *Braj Mandalasth-Tirthoon ka Sankshipt Vivaran [A Brief Description Pilgrimage Sites in Braj]*, (Hapur, Uttar Pradesh: Sri Radha Madhav Sankirtan Mandal, 1978), p. 62.

²² Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 72.

²³ Norvan Hein, *The Miracle Plays of Mathurā* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 313.

performance stage] is erected in the centre, where *raslilas* were to be performed all night.²⁴

Thus, a *Braj-yatra* is a celebration of culture, devotion, and a “divine environment” dedicated to Krishna.²⁵ A quote from Haberman’s account of the journey, in the words of one participant, encapsulates the meaning of the *yatra*:

They want to see with their own eyes what they have read or heard about in the *Bhagvat Purana*, to see the *lila* places for themselves. This increases their belief. Temples are made by men, but the things we see on *yatra*, such as footprints in stone, are natural, so that anyone can believe things done in Braj. Seeing these signs in stone, anyone can believe in the supernatural things that happened in Braj and can begin to see Krishna here. ‘Darshan’ or ‘seeing’ is a central act in the *yatra*.²⁶

The route, the journey, its mediation through the stories of the land and performance of rituals, all contribute to the realisation of spiritual connection with divinity in a sacred landscape. These are also the factors that aid in the experience of the aesthetics of religious travel through such a landscape. In recent times, however, the tradition of walking pilgrimages has been undergoing a considerable change in terms of mode and method of journeying, which includes direct travel to a pilgrimage site by motorised transport including trains, buses and cars, increasingly on package tours.²⁷ These changes also mean that the conventional understanding of aesthetics in such travel has to be reviewed.

A Contemporary *Braj-yatra*

I performed a *Braj-yatra* while conducting fieldwork for a project in the region in 2005. This *yatra* was organised under the guidance of a leading guru from Vrindavan who has a large following of devotees from cities in western and north-western India. The leader, referred to by the honorific title, Maharaj-ji, announced the *yatra* during one of his religious tours of duty in 2004 in the city of Indore in central western India. After one of his *katha* performances, the Maharaj-ji encouraged his audience to experience the spiritual benefits of performing the *Braj-yatra*. He announced that he was organising a special *Braj-yatra* that would take place not during the busy pilgrimage season in

²⁴ Mittal, *Caurasi Kos ki Braj-yatra*, p. 15.

²⁵ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 110.

²⁶ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 83.

²⁷ David Gladstone, *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour: Travel and Tourism in the Third World* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 235; Kiran Shinde, ‘Religious Tourism: Exploring a New Form of Sacred Journey in North India,’ in *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change*, ed. Janet Cochrane (London: Elsevier Publishing, 2008), pp. 245-257.

August, but during the spring festival of *Holi* in March 2005. Maharaj-ji's *yatra* was to take place from 14 to 27 March, 2005. He assured the audience that he had substantial experience in organising *yatras*, and that this one would be performed in eight days. Participants would be provided with comfortable accommodation and would travel in cars rather than buses to all the main sacred places in the Braj region. Appendix 1 presents the advertisement and itinerary of this *yatra*.

Maharaj-ji had rented a large *ashram* in Vrindavan for housing the participants of the *yatra*. On 13 March, a registration desk was set up. On registering and paying their fee, participants were allocated a place to stay in the ashram and a seat in one of the cars to be used for the duration of the tour. By the end of the day, there were over 2,000 participants registered for the tour.²⁸ In the evening, Maharaj-ji arrived at the *ashram* in ceremonial style and made his way to the canopied dais in the centre of the courtyard. He welcomed the registered participants of the *yatra*, reiterated its spiritual importance, and outlined the itinerary, rules, and other organisational aspects of the tour.

The *yatra* was formally launched on the following day (14 March), beginning with a ceremonial procession in the morning from the *ashram* through the streets of Vrindavan and ending at the banks of the Yamuna River. The procession was accompanied by a band. Once at the river-bank, Maharaj-ji led the ritual of Yamuna worship.²⁹

The actual tour of Braj began on 15 March. The 2,000 or more participants were transported in 150 cars and 10 buses hired from local taxi and tour bus operators. The *yatra* caravan was led by the Maharaj-ji who travelled in a large air-conditioned van with his core support staff. The van was donated to him by one of his wealthy followers. This was the biggest car-*yatra* ever organised by any guru in Vrindavan, a fact that Maharaj-ji repeatedly mentioned in his lectures at the end of each day.

In the following days, the *yatra* took on a standard pattern: participants assembled for a buffet-style breakfast served at the *ashram* at around 7.30 a.m., then boarded the cars and buses around 8.30 a.m. The cavalcade of cars and buses made their way to two or three sites – temples, shrines, or natural

²⁸ The majority of participants were from Indore, followed by others from cities in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab who had heard of the proposed *yatra* through word of mouth from other followers. Twelve persons formed a core support group and the entourage of Maharaj-ji, and they were in charge of managing the arrangement, logistics and, supervision of the *yatra*.

²⁹ Several participants performed this ritual. A component of the ritual was offering a *sari* (a dress consisting of several yards of light material that is draped and worn primarily by Hindu women) and other material offerings to the Yamuna followed by collective singing of hymns in praise of Yamuna. The participants followed Maharaj-ji in this ritual.

features like water bodies and hillocks – stopping at each place for about an hour. Packed lunches were transported in a special van, and were served at around 1.30 p.m. The procession of vehicles made their way back to the ashram by 5.30 p.m. Appendix 2 outlines the daily itinerary and places visited during the *yatra*. The car-*yatra* of Braj did not follow the circuit or sequence of traditional pilgrimage travel around the region. Instead, over the nine days, the *yatra* covered about twenty-five sacred sites (five *vans* or wooded groves, three *kunds* or dams, and 17 temples and shrines) through daily forays from the *ashram* base in Vrindavan and back with no night halts or camps in any of the sites of the traditional pilgrimage circuit.

Cultural programs were organised in the evenings at the *ashram*. For these programs, Maharaj-ji assumed his seat on the ceremonial dais in the courtyard and recited stories from the *Bhagavatpurana* for about two hours. This performance, however, resembled an orchestra with an electric synthesiser, keyboard, and drums churning out devotional songs in praise of Krishna, interspersed with anecdotes and jokes picking on the everyday life of a common man in India. At the end of these sessions, the participants sang hymns to mark the end of the day which was followed by an elaborate buffet dinner. Wealthy participants sponsored these dinners on particular days over the duration of the *yatra*. The *Holi* festival was celebrated on 18 March with singing, *raslila*, and the ceremonial feast of *chappan-bhog*.

This car-*yatra* had its own prominent features that not only indicated a departure from the traditional *yatra*, but also became significant for their influence on the overall experience. On the second day, we were supposed to go to Mathura and near-by places. But instead, we began the tour by going to the next destination mentioned on the itinerary, Madhuban. The visit to Mathura had to be missed because not all cars and buses could enter or park in the busy streets. On that day, and several times later during the *yatra*, there was confusion amongst the car drivers due to last minute changes in the itinerary and the ambiguity of the terms of contract. It was generally agreed that Maharaj-ji would be the first to arrive at the destinations with his *Bhajan*-party (processional band), where the musicians would beat the drum and play the *shehnai* (a musical instrument) sounding the arrival of Maharaj-ji to the places visited. Several times, however, it so happened that a number of the cars would already reach places before his van, making his arrival less ceremonial and creating problems of traffic management. Maharaj-ji, occasionally, voiced his concern and unhappiness over these situations. But this problem with timing continued.

Accessibility by car determined the places visited during the tour. Many places that were part of the traditional Braj pilgrimage circuit were omitted

from the itinerary because they were only accessible by foot or bullock carts. As mentioned earlier, narrating stories to highlight eulogies of places in Braj is integral to *Braj-yatra*, but it appeared that, after two days, Maharaj-ji had lost interest in sharing these stories due to the considerable time-lag between arrivals of cars and buses. The quality and amount of time spent at temples and shrines was relatively less than the time taken to steer the way for cars though the chaos of the huge motorcade moving in and out of the narrow streets and small villages. Most participants found that they had little time or were too tired to perform the ritual *parikrama* or circumambulation of the temples or sites visited each day. Some participants complained bitterly about the heat and dust, or about walking any distance from the parking sites to the temples or shrines, and the physical appearance of the sites. The comment I heard most often was, “what kind of hell has Maharaj-ji brought us to?”

I, however, also observed that a few participants, mainly ardent devotees (a few men but largely women, who seemed to have made vows before coming to Braj and were also aware of Krishna’s miracles through the reading or listening of the *Bhagvatpurana*), religiously performed rituals at every temple and place that the *yatra* stopped at. These devotees had come prepared with all kinds of material that are used as offerings in Krishna worship. In some places, for example, participants stepped into the water of Yamuna and *kunds*, performed the ritual bath (*snana*), and others expressed their contentment with the sprinkling of water (*acaman*).

The trip ended on the eighth day instead of the ninth (according to the original itinerary). Maharaj-ji cancelled the tour on the last day as he believed the participants had acquired enough merit just by stepping into Vrindavan and seeing so many places in Braj. He stated that the *yatra* would still be treated as complete in terms of religious practice.³⁰ Most participants with whom I spoke after this visit criticised this behaviour and expressed their dissatisfaction with Maharaj-ji. There were, however, several participants who were more sympathetic to Maharaj-ji and praised him for organising the *yatra*. Umesh Chandar, one participant from Indore, reflected on the *yatra*:

For a common man, such *yatra* is not possible all alone by himself.
So in a way it is good that somebody like Maharaj-ji organises this
yatra and provides an opportunity for so many of us who come from

³⁰ On this day, using the pretext of the *parikrama* of Vrindavan, Maharaj-ji took all the participants to his own ashrams. He revealed that he was renovating one of the oldest ashrams in Vrindavan, and appealed for generous donations from all participants towards the cause of the renovation. He offered the prospective donors the opportunity to stay at his ashram during their future trips to Vrindavan, and said that if some participants pledged INR 25,000, they would be given a lifetime membership at the ashram.

[the] middle class. It is in such *yatra* that we are able to realise our dream of visiting so many places in Braj.³¹

The experience I came away with from participating in Maharaj-ji's *yatra* was the frenetic pace and the overwhelming complexity of car-based travel to pilgrimage centres. There was a qualitative difference in how a religious guru performed his role in the *yatra*. Instead of functioning as a spiritual mentor guiding his followers through a reflective journey to sacred sites, Maharaj-ji (along with his aides) operated more like a package-tour provider who mediated between tourists, their expectations, and their holiday destinations. The assurances of comfort and exclusive pilgrimage experience made by Maharaj-ji became the central preoccupation and expectation for participating followers throughout the duration of the *yatra*. The huge car-*yatra*, which Maharaj-ji repeatedly emphasised as the distinguishing feature of the tour, turned out to be the main source of tension and target of complaints. Such a varied range of experiences amongst devotees suggest that, along with internal motivation and devotion, external factors that determined the context also became significant in developing their aesthetic experience of religious travel in Braj.

Discussion

The 'aesthetics of engagement' differ in the traditional format of *Braj-yatra* and its contemporary performances. In the following paragraphs, I highlight and discuss the factors that appear to have influenced the engagement of travellers in this landscape.

Mode of Travel

Haberman's rich accounts clearly suggest that "the forests of Braj are best relished by walking, not sitting."³² The experiential aspect is highlighted even further:

The pilgrims of Braj get down in dirt; they worship not in the immaculate temple but in open landscapes, dark forests, flowing rivers, dusty plains, muddy fields, still ponds, and rocky mountains. Since the body is the vehicle of such experience, I could not have written about the pilgrimage in the way I have if I had not put my own body on the line.³³

In my *yatra*, however, the body was replaced with motorised transport in cars. For most of the time we were sitting in a car and the time spent in cars was

³¹ Interviewed 21 March, 2005.

³² Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 130.

³³ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. xv.

proportionately greater than that actually spent out of them. Although a car has its own ‘aesthetics of engagement,’ it proved a deterrent in experiencing the landscape in the way that it should have been.³⁴ Yrjö Sepänmaa rightly argues that a “car limits or at least directs observations of the outside to visual aspects and shuts off the stimuli of most of the other senses. We do not smell, hear or feel the environment in a strong and direct way ... we are encased separately from the milieu that slides past us.”³⁵ Thus, travelling in a car creates its own micro-context. During the *yatra* there were at least 68 participants in a car and their conversations occupied most of the time of travel. Moreover, drivers kept playing loud music, sometimes peppy numbers from films and sometimes devotional music, which at times were turned into a parody where devotional lyrics were made to fit with popular Hindi film songs. All this created a new form of aesthetics where the virtual landscape in which the movies where such songs featured were filmed was discussed, and the landscape itself formed only a backdrop. The car and the road on which a car could go defined the new landscape and its aesthetics.

Method of Travel

Haberman reiterates that “pilgrims are to circle the edge of a natural phenomenon and thereby honour, see, and enjoy it, not penetrate its surface to achieve a central core ... Braj is to be viewed and enjoyed by circling its periphery ... it is this that makes the *Braj-yatra* distinct from most other types of pilgrimage.”³⁶ In my car-*yatra*, instead of circling along the periphery, we were forced to follow linear trips to and from a base station at the central core. In doing so, both the symbolic meaning and physical experience of other places at the periphery were lost. This almost resonates with Sepänmaa’s observation that “the road restricts the traveller, who must stay on it.”³⁷ The origin-destination trip had cut short the time in the landscape. It also meant that compressing time to see so many places compromised the time required for experiencing and meditating on the landscape.

³⁴ Yrjö Sepänmaa, ‘The Aesthetics of the Road, Road Art, and Road Traffic,’ *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Vol. 1 (2005), at <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=348/>. Accessed 15/04/2012.

³⁵ Sepänmaa, ‘The Aesthetics of the Road.’

³⁶ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 68.

³⁷ Sepänmaa, ‘The Aesthetics of the Road.’

Timing of the Journey

The timing of the *yatra* was very significant on two accounts. For one, it presented the landscape in a form that was not imagined in the descriptions of traditional *Braj-yatra*. The appearance of the landscape in the month of February is different from its form in August, which is immediately after monsoons where lush green fields are seen, ponds are full of water, and the landscape comes to life; “the rainy season transforms the dry, parched earth into a verdant landscape with the river Yamuna surging.”³⁸ The correct timing also helps in the performance of rituals. For instance, bathing in ponds is an essential aspect of the *yatra*, and ponds would be “full to the brim” during monsoons but otherwise quite low during other times of the year.³⁹ In the contemporary version, the timing was compromised to coincide with a popular festival, but this was also the beginning of summer. It meant that the landscape was not in its full glory, and features which otherwise could be appreciated during rains were not able to be easily experienced at this time.

Second, the timing of the journey has a religious importance. It is believed that religious travel is undertaken with a specific timing for its highest benefits. According to Bhatt’s *Braj Bhakti Vilasam*, *Braj-yatra* “is to be performed in twenty-three days ... begin[ning] on the eighth day of the waning moon in the month of Bhadon; this is Janmashtami, Krishana’s birthday.”⁴⁰ Bhatt declares that the performance of the pilgrimage at this time is most effective; performed at any other time, the results will be significantly less.⁴¹

Spatial Arrangement and Narratives of the Landscape

Braj-yatra connects places and sites where the geography and landscape are connected to legends of Krishna. According to Haberman, “the physical geography of Braj is itself a kind of text, and ... the preeminent way of ‘reading’ this text is by means of pilgrimage.”⁴² The landscape is to be appreciated at both the physical and metaphysical level for its religious symbolism and meaning. For instance, the ritual of bathing in the Yamuna River, besides being a symbolic act, “is a re-actualisation of cosmological events in which pilgrims feel their participation and literally immerse themselves.”⁴³ This can be further illustrated by Haberman’s description of a

³⁸ Sinha, *Landscapes in India*, p. 94.

³⁹ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 81.

⁴⁰ This differs from the pilgrimage of the *Pushti Marg*, which lasts for forty days, and begins on the eleventh day of the bright half of the moon of *Bhadon*.

⁴¹ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 62.

⁴² Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. viii.

⁴³ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 193.

place called Charan-pahari on the route of *Braj-yatra*. He describes the topography thus:

Huge rocks began to appear on our right once again as we approached the town of Jatipura. The mountain had a mysterious quality about it here. Rock stacked upon rock rose high into the blue sky, and each rock seemed to resemble the shape of the entire mountain, replicating itself endlessly in the expanding multitude of forms.⁴⁴

Haberman also effectively depicts its symbolic value:

Contact with the physical forms of Braj that have been invested with emotional energy, such as the rock at Charan Phari, cultivates an enhanced emotional experience that affirms [the] presence of Krishna.⁴⁵

Stories of place are important in ‘reading’ the landscape, but in the car-yatra there were hardly any stories narrated. Only those who had read about Braj and carried some form of guides were able to relate to the mythological importance of the places they visited. For instance, one of the forests we visited is believed to have *kadamb* and *tamaal* (*Garcinia Morella*) trees whose branches intertwine giving it a bower-like appearance. Devotees believe that this intertwining of two different colours of branches from two different trees is Krishna’s *lila*, and represents the divine communion of Krishna with his consort Radha. Since Maharaj-ji did not explain this, most participants were not aware of the reason that this particular place was visited. Similarly, in most places, participants did not have any means of knowing about the site and relied on information provided by others familiar with the legends.

Devotees marvelled at forests, trees, ponds, and lakes, but did not realise the significance of those places. Moreover, they were not able to know the miracle stories that made the place an object of ritual and aesthetic pleasure. In the foot-pilgrimage, cultural performances are common during night-halts in places that are believed to provide the correct setting for visualising physical manifestations of particular episodes from the Krishna legend. The shifting of night-halts to Vrindavan de-emphasised the specificity of those sites for cultural performances, further contributing to their loss of symbolism and active practice.

In summary, pilgrimage to Braj is about “realizing the sacred within the profane by cultivating the appropriate sensibility,”⁴⁶ but developing such sensibilities seemed a far-away thing when the vehicle of experience was motorised car and the route was paved road. The performance of *Braj-yatra* as

⁴⁴ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Haberman, *Journey through the Twelve Forests*, p. 171.

⁴⁶ Entwistle, *Braj*, p. 106.

a 'car-based package-tour' reduced an ontological experience of the sacred landscape into a mere circulation limited to a few sacred spots in Braj. Although this experience continued to be mediated through religious practice, it was evident that some participants were disappointed; they were not able to clearly relate what they had read about Braj to what existed in reality.

The contemporary version of the Braj-pilgrimage suggests that there exists a spectrum that defines the intensity of the religious experience of the landscape: at one end is the experience of a true devotee who believes in the 'imagined' and 'religiously represented' landscape, readily accepting what is seen and focusing on connecting to the presence of divinity (Krishna in the case of Braj), rather than being bothered about the physical condition in which such experience takes place. At the other end is the experience of someone who has become a participant with the motivation to see the place, perform obligatory religious rituals, and probably accompany a loved one on the journey. This experience is relatively banal as such participants focus on the materiality of the place and are seldom able to transcend towards a metaphysical experience. Furthermore, their experience is largely influenced by external factors such as the mode of travel, comfort, distance to the objects of worship, and crowding at temples, rather than on the inner journey.

Thus, both the internal and external factors that contribute to the experience of the landscape also contribute to the aesthetic engagement of a traveller in a religious place. Consequently, visiting a religious landscape may also generate a feeling of disappointment when travellers are not able to identify with the cultural and religious values in such landscapes, places that most of the times are more 'constructed' and 'imagined' than 'real' in their physical manifestation.

Concluding Remarks

I began this article with the purpose of exploring various dimensions of the aesthetics of religious travel using the pilgrimage landscape of Braj. Pilgrimage landscapes may have elements of natural beauty, connecting these elements with legends, stories, meanings, and rituals that heighten their aesthetic value. Deciphering these interpretations is a must for the better appreciation of pilgrimage landscapes. David Kinsley rightly observes that "[w]here we might see simply rivers, hills, ponds, and forests, the pilgrim sees a landscape charged with divinity, a land that was actually shaped by mythic events."⁴⁷ While most foot-pilgrimages of the past aided in developing sensitivities to appreciate and absorb landscapes by providing enough time and space, the

⁴⁷ Kinsley, 'Learning the Story of the Land,' p. 239.

same cannot be said of contemporary religious travel that uses cars as the mode of travel, and an 'origin-destination' trip as the route.

This change in the mode and method of travel also signifies a shift in the patterns of religiosity and religious behaviour. The aspirations and demands of religious tourism, to a large extent, drive the packaging of a pilgrimage landscape. In this situation, one might be tempted to condemn such endeavours as compromising the site's sanctity following the conventional discourse of consumerism and commoditisation. Because they fulfil the contemporary needs of religious experience, it is necessary to consider such landscapes and contemporary pilgrimages (where route and body become road and car) as challenges for understanding the aesthetics associated with emerging forms of religious tourism.

Appendix 1: The Itinerary of the *Braj-yatra*

Day	Date	Activities/places to be visited (advertised in the original program)	Revised itinerary during the <i>yatra</i>
First	14/03/05	Yamuna Chunri festival, Vrindavan parikrama, Vrindavan Darshan	Yamuna Chunri festival, Vrindavan parikrama, Vrindavan Darshan
Second	15/03/05	Birla temple, Vishram ghat, Dwarkadheesh darshan, Madhuban, Taal Ban, Daoji, Gangasagar, Kapil Dev darshan	Shantanu kund, Madhuban, Taal Ban, Chatikara
Third	16/03/05	Govardhan parikrama, govind kund, apsara kund, Jatipura (Mukharvind), Adi badri, Gangotri, Yamnotri, Kedarnath	Govardhan, Radhakund
Fourth	17/03/05	Gaya kund, Bimal kund, Mankameshwar Mahadeo, Madan mohanji, Govind ji, Gopinath ji, Lanka, Setu bandh, Rameshwar, kamban, Nagaji kadamkhandi, daoji darshan	Barsana, Nandgaon
Fifth	18/03/05	Barsana, Vrishbhanu Sarovar Snan, Sankhri Khor, Chiksauli, Morkuti, Shriji temple, Prem Sarovar, Hau, Bilau, Nandgaon, kokila ban, Kshirsagar, Sheshshayi	Badrinath, Kedarnath, Kaman, Holi festival
Sixth	19/03/05	Nandgaon, Phalen, Vihar ban, Chir Bihari, Katyayani temple, Belvan	Chir ghat, Biharvan, Phalen, Kosi, Sheshshayi
Seventh	20/03/05	Bhandirvan, Vanshi vat, Mansarovar, Radharani, Ganeshbaug	Mansarovar, Bhandirvan, Belvan, Raman Reti, Baldeo
Eighth	21/03/05	Baldeo dauji, Chintaharan, Brahmand ghat, Ukkhal	Vrindavan parikrama

		bandhan, Chaurasi khambha, raman reti, gokulm Mathura, Bhuteshwar mahadeo	
Ninth	22/03/05	Holi festival, phool bangla to be celebrated at Vrindavan	

Source:

Flyer distributed by the organisers before the yatra, translated from Hindi

Other information contained in the flyer:

Organiser: *****

Venue: Phogla Ashram, Vrindavan

The flyer instructs participants to prepare beforehand for the planning of facilities, accommodation, and car travel, and to register. The flyer was distributed in at least 22 cities where key people were deputed to give additional information regarding the *yatra* to potential participants. The flyer also mentioned the amount required for sponsoring food arrangements and the feasts for all participants:

Breakfast	2100 Rupees
Afternoon tea	1100 Rupees
One-time feast	5100 Rupees

Appendix 2: Part of the Brochure advertising the *Braj-yatra*


यात्रा प्रस्ताव

भक्तों के विशेष आग्रह पर विगत दो वर्षों की भांति इस वर्ष भी ब्रज चौरासी कोस की यात्रा हो रही है। डा. संजयकृष्ण 'सलिल' के सानिध्य में पिछली वर्ष 25 फरवरी 2004 से 2 मार्च 2004 तक यात्रा 65 टाटा सूमो गाड़ियों द्वारा सम्पन्न हुई जिसमें लगभग 500 भक्तजन सम्मिलित हुए थे।

भक्तजनों की सुविधा को ध्यान में रखते हुए यात्रा प्रतिदिन सुबह 7 बजे चाय नाश्ता लेकर प्रारम्भ होगी, फिर बीच यात्रा में नियत स्थान पर दोपहर प्रसाद (भोजन) ग्रहण किया जायेगा, रात्रि में यात्रा वृन्दावन में ही आकर रुकेगी। यही रात्रि प्रसाद (भोजन) की व्यवस्था होगी।

इस यात्रा का भक्तों से कोई सेवा शुल्क नहीं लिया जायेगा। स्वेच्छा से जो भक्त सेवा करना चाहेगा उसकी सेवा स्वीकार्य होगी।

यात्रा में सम्मिलित होने की पूर्व सूचना भक्तजन समूह पर भेजें ताकि आपके आवास, प्रसाद एवं वाहन की सुव्यवस्था सुनिश्चित की जा सके।

यात्रा में सम्मिलित होने के लिये सभी भक्तजन दिनांक 13 मार्च 2005 को फोगला आश्रम, रमणरेती, वृन्दावन पहुँचकर अपना पंजीकरण करा लें।

भक्तों के ठहरने का स्थान

फोगला आश्रम

रमणरेती, वृन्दावन फोन : (0565) 2540489

ब्रज चौरासी कोस यात्रा विवरण

प्रथम दिवस
वसुना पुनरी उत्सव, वृन्दावन परिक्रमा एवं वृन्दावन दर्शन

द्वितीय दिवस
बिरला मन्दिर, विश्राम घाट, द्वात्रिकापीथ दर्शन, मधुबन, तालबन, दाऊजी, गंगासागर, कपिल देव दर्शन।

तृतीय दिवस
गोवर्धन परिक्रमा, गोविन्द कुण्ड, अप्सराकुण्ड, जतीपुरा में मुखारविन्द, आदिबट्टी, गंगोत्री, यमनोत्री, कंदारनाथ।

चतुर्थ दिवस
गया कुण्ड, बिमल कुण्ड, मनकामेश्वर महादेव, मदनमोहन जी, गोविन्द जी, गोपीनाथ जी, लंका, सेतुबन्ध, रामेश्वर, कामवन, नागाजी की कदमचण्डी, दाऊजी दर्शन।

पंचम दिवस
बरसाना, वृषभानु सरोवर स्नान, साँकरी खोर, चिकसीली, मोरकुटी, श्रीजी का मन्दिर, प्रेम सरोवर, राऊ, बिलाऊ नंद गाँव के, कोकिल वन, क्षीर सागर, शेषशायी भगवान का दर्शन।

षष्ठ दिवस
नन्दगाँव, फाल्गुन, विहार वन, घोर बिसरी जी का दर्शन, कात्यानी देवी दर्शन, बेलवन।

सप्तम दिवस
भाण्डार वन, वंशीवट, मानसरोवर, राधापनी गणेश बाग का दर्शन।

अष्टम दिवस
बलदेव से दाऊजी के दर्शन, चिन्ताहरण, ब्रह्माण्ड घाट, ऊखलबन्धन, चौरासी खम्बा, रमणरेती, गोखुल, मधुप, भूतेश्वर महादेव के दर्शन।

नवम दिवस
होली महोत्सव, रंगी एवं फूलों की होली, जाकुर जी का फूल बंगला।

नोट : यात्रा के दौरान भक्तों के लिये नियत भोजन-प्रसाद एवं बाल भोग (नाश्ता) की व्यवस्था है जिसमें भक्तजन जो सहयोग करना चाहें उनकी सेवा मान्य होगी।

प्रातः बाल भोग (नाश्ता) 2100/-रु. (इक्कीस सौ रुपये मात्र)
चाय 1100/-रु. (ग्यारह सौ रुपये मात्र)
एक समय का भोजन - प्रसाद 5100/-रु. (इक्कीस सौ रुपये मात्र)

विशेष
यात्रा के अन्तर्गत विशेष उत्सव रात्रि में प्रतिदिन रासलीला, प्रवचन, भजन संकीर्तन आदि भक्तों के आवास स्थल फोगला आश्रम, रमणरेती, वृन्दावन में होगी।